

# Room 21

a story by Brooks Kohler



The Rounder Boys had a problem. Cool nights in autumn caused heartache. One of its key members chose love over the gang, and word on the street was he was leaving town without saying goodbye.

To find the truth, the members sent Mickey, a tough, lanky street kid with a chiseled chin. Close to midnight, he entered the smoke filled Irish Pub on Casten Street dressed in a brown leather blazer worn in fair weather. The usual faces hunched the bar protecting their drinks as Mickey peered into the gray fog searching for red flags. He had a look in his eyes that read the room like a detective.

Slowly he inched forward, passing one-by-one the private patrons. Several steps away from the door, he stopped at the back of a chubby man with a monk's crown. The man nervously sipped his whiskey but refused to peer over his shoulder at the menacing thug only inches away. He did, however, with reasonable effort, try to make small talk.

“How are ya, Mick?”



Gunfire from inside the bar followed with Mickey exiting the pub in a calm, reserved manner. He ran his fingers through his greasy hair and reached into his coat pocket for a crumpled pack of cigarettes. Nobody challenged him, not the hookers, not the cons, and not the skirting narcs. The Rounders had a history of bloody vengeance on their side and a long list of unsolved murders of those who enjoyed testing it.

As he lit a new cigarette, a cop in a slow cruiser caught Mickey's attention, but the officer passed without glancing in the youth's direction. Taking it as a sign to move quickly, the young man sucked hard on the tobacco and darted to a pay phone.

Debbie, a cute blonde with an adolescent body but adult hustle, wore a fur coat in the glow of a flickering street light as she smoked a sugar dandy outside a massage parlor known as Fairlane's Tavern. With her foot resting against the redbrick wall, she released a canon plume of pleasure at a



passing drag queen who flipped her off and said, “Grow up, baby.”

Chilling mist made it a slow night. Debbie gave her hit-ticket an underhanded pitch to the street and pushed off the building to pace the sidewalk. She spun on her heel and noticed Mickey approaching with a cigarette cherry bouncing like a red beacon. She looked to the ground to avoid him.

“Don’t shutdown on me,” said Mickey. “What you heard?”

“Nothin’,” replied Debbie.

“That’s not what you heard,” reminded Mickey. He pinched the cigarette between his fingers and studied the concrete wasteland for any sign of a witness. “Come on. Tell me something.” Debbie scraped the tip of her shoe on the sidewalk as she faded in and out of her thoughts. “I’m going to ask again, and this time I better get an answer. What you heard?”

“Nobody knows anything.”

Lunging, he clasped hold of her face and squeezed her cheeks with a firm grip. “When I



“speak, you look at me!”

She pushed his hand away and stumbled backwards almost falling down. “I’m not a tramp! I’m not a whore!” she screamed.

Mickey took a final drag and gave the cigarette a flick. “And, I’m not really giving two nickels as if I care you made honor roll.”

“Why you being a prick, Mick? What’d I do to you?”

“Cause I can be!” Snake biting her wrist and twisting it, he pulled her to him. “What you heard you little slut?”

Debbie winced in pain. “It hurts, hurts, Mick. Let go of me!” The child broke loose and again backed away. A momentary calm settled on them. She saw the red flesh, rubbed her wrist, and sniffed a tear. “You hurt me, Mick.”

“I didn’t hurt you,” said Mickey. “You got perverts with telephone pole shafts on you all night long, and you think that hurt you?”

Debbie trembled and wiped a tear. She swallowed a deep ache and said, “Now, you’re gonna



get it.”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah,...” said Mickey, waving her off. “I never touched you.”

“You come down here,” continued Debbie, “and damage me? Me? Your friend! Ah, you just signed your death wish scumbag.”

“It’s not possible to damage, damaged goods,” said Mickey. He grinned a clown’s foolish grin.

Debbie’s mind searched for an answer that did not cause pain.

Mickey misshaped his face by inhaling deeply. He snorted snot and turn his head to spit out yellow phlegm. “What you know?” he asked. “I don’t have all night.”

She playfully rushed forward and held out her hand with the palm up.

“What’s this?”

“Look into it,” said Debbie.

“You wanna play games? I hope you’re wanting gum because you know I don’t pay for information.”

“Check the palm.”



“Why?”

“My palm,” she insisted. Mickey looked into her palm, and Debbie slapped him hard. “That’s for treating me like a whore!”

“That’s what you are you little...”

Mickey raised his arm to pop her face but stopped when he noticed the silhouette of a tall, menacing man staring at him from beside a distant street sign. A dread washed over him, the kind of dread earned from a streetwise knowledge. Debbie had serious protection, off the grid protection, out of the country protection, and bribed protection. She had the kind of protection purchased from the Devil himself.

As Mickey lowered his arm, Debbie turned to see the man.

“Check Willow’s on 8<sup>th</sup>,” she said. “I hear your boy’s got a room upstairs.”

“If you’re right, that’s a stupid move. That’s our territory.”

“Can’t be that stupid, you’ve been looking for him for what, three weeks?” Debbie again, held out



her palm. “Now pay me what you owe me or wish you had.”

If ever a place deserved to be burned to the ground, it was Willow’s Hotel. Once a jewel of the city, it had over time become a crusty stone used by addicts and dregs to douse themselves in misery. Worse for Mickey, it was several blocks away, too far to walk and not worth the effort. He found a payphone and made a call.

Waiting in a damp alley that wreaked of burnt aromas from a hodgepodge of Asian restaurants, Mickey tugged hard on a cigarette as the headlights of a yellow 1972 Plymouth Duster entered and brightened the gap. The car stopped, and the driver’s window lowered. “You call a cab?” asked a gruff male voice.

Mickey flicked the smoke and walked to the passenger’s side. He opened the door and plopped down violently onto a smooth, cold bench seat.

“Thanks for treating my car with ease,” said



the man. "I recommend you use the dash for a foot rest."

Mickey rolled his eyes and pulled the door shut with a car rocking slam. "You're welcome."

"You sure he's there?"

"He better be," replied Mickey.

"Or what?"

Mickey turned to look at the voice and saw a man with a round, pudgy face and stubbly beard. "Who are you?"

"I'm the grim reaper," replied the man.

Mickey relaxed, pulled out a new cigarette and lit it. "Well, then drive before I catch my death."

Twenty minutes later the Duster made a right onto a near empty street and eased into a place to park outside Willow's Hotel. Built in the early 1900s, the tall, gray building had a forgotten exterior that welcomed the city's poor. Near the steps leading up to the hotel's entrance, a group of dingy men drinking wine warmed themselves around a burn barrel sprouting flames.



“I don’t like this place,” said the driver.

“And this from a man who brings death,” commented Mickey. He pushed open the passenger door and stepped out onto the street. He lit a new cigarette, kicked the passenger door shut, and started to the Willow.

“Hey!” shouted the man, opening his door and rising up from behind the steering wheel. “You gotta piece on ya!?”

“You gotta megaphone!?” asked Mickey. “Come on!”

Inside the hotel, the men stepped over sleeping bodies as they gripped the narrow staircase leading up to Room 21. After a few minutes, both arrived at a wooden door scarred by years of abuse and hard knocks.

Mickey pulled his gun from his belt and rapped the door with the tip of the barrel. He waited for the telltale signs of life but heard silence.

“Try it again,” whispered the driver.

Mickey tapped with a slow tot-tot-tot.



The driver leaned and pressed his ear to the door. From inside the room, a strange grinding sound resembling the sharpening of a pencil started. The grinding grew louder and more intense with each second. Hunkering close, the confused man flattened himself against the door as if to push it in. No sooner did he look up to form an opinion, did a gun blast splinter out into his cheek. In agony, he ripped his face away exposing the gaping wound. Clinching his fist and grunting, he let out a roar heard in Hell. Frightened, Mickey aimed his gun, shot the man between the eyes, and with a powerful kick gave the door an intense thrust that caused the deadbolt to snap loose from the frame.

His eyes closed and his bullets flying, Mickey peppered the room's lime green walls. By chance, a few bullets hit a gliding figure, and the shooting stopped.

A ringing silence faded into the ambient noise of the aftermath. White smoke oozed from the gun's barrel, and an intense ache rippled through Mickey's chest as the decaying room swayed like a



ship on rolling seas.

Mentally clamped shut by fear, he pried his eyes open knowing a part of his soul left his body along with the history of the room. Each passing second flickered into technicolor focus until on the floor, sticking out from below the base of an unmade bed, Mickey noticed a pair of thin legs in brown slacks.

His body on fire with fear, Mickey braced himself as he made his way to inspect the body.

Creeping cautiously, he peered over the mattress and saw blue eyes on a man's face viewing the final moments of a tragic life. Mickey reached down and used his fingers to touch the man's chest. The body, still warm, moved a bit but not enough to signal hope.

"Skip?" asked Mickey. "You hear me, Skip?" The body did not twitch. "Skip?" The body remained still, and Mickey watched its essence drain away.

It shook him straight, and he bit his lip as he studied the room. A ratty, pink chair existed in a



corner next to an ashtray overflowing with the charred remains of cigarettes. On a small table near a window, Mickey noticed a syringe filled with a brown devilish liquid. He walked to the table and stared at the needle. He moved so as to peer at the corpse to ensure it not moving and returned to ruminate on the shiny point.

Almost as if forced, he dropped his gun, removed his coat, and unfastened the belt to his pants. With a quick yank, Mickey pulled the belt free from his waste and slipped the leather through the buckle's frame to create a noose for his arm.

With a brilliant expertise, he touched the tip of the tingle to his vein and pushing hard on the plunger, emptied the barrel of brown into the tunnel to the soul.

Mickey's eyes watered as reserved feelings took over. Stepping backwards, he looked down at the remains and felt himself attached to the corpse as he grew numb. The dragon spread its wings and sunk its talons into Mickey's heart. Slowly, the years of unbridled youth folded in until the chalk of the



eye rolled up and his body eased down to take its place alongside the inevitable end.

THE END

“Room 21” written by Brooks Kohler (2019). (Published by Brooks Kohler in 2022 for the purpose of adding the story to the Internet Archive.)

This story is fiction. Similarities to any person living or deceased are coincidence.